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The implications of reduced frequency programmes in the Romanian higher education system

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Abstract

The present study aims to analyze, using the statistical methods, the grades' dynamics of the students enrolled in reduced frequency programme between 2006 and 2009 at the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University in Iasi, and the implications of these results. We compared the results of the students attending the reduced frequency programme with those obtained by the rest of the students at the same Faculties, enrolled from 2006 to 2009. Our initial assumption was that between the two groups of students attending courses at the same faculty there are no significant differences in grades and the interest shown in study. The final results contradicted our premises: the students enrolled to the reduced frequency educational programme had lower grades during the university years and at the bachelor degree exam. This underlines the lack of efficiency of this form of education and the students' poor knowledge, since they paid little (if any) attention to the preparation of the exams, to the individual study of the disciplines included in the educational plan and to the writing of the graduation paper.

Keywords: higher education system, reduced frequency education, Bologna Process, Romania.

1. Project objective

The present study aims at analyzing, in a critical manner, the grades of the students enrolled to the reduced frequency study programme at the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University in Iasi, from 2006 to 2009. The conclusions of our analysis reveal themselves even more relevant when comparing their results to those of the students enrolled to the full-time study mode in the same period. The differences in quality lay mostly in a series of factors which characterize the reduced frequency forms of education and those who attend them.

2. Introduction

After the Revolution in December 1989, marking the end of the communist regime in Romania, the national education system suffered some major transformations. The most significant changes occurred in the higher education area and consisted, among others, in an unprecedented increase in the number of students admitted to the first year of study. Moreover, this reformation of the educational system offered to the youth who wanted to study the possibility of fully paying the tuition fees, if they were not admitted on the few tuition-free places. The universities began organizing long-distance learning and reduced frequency programmes for the authorized and accredited specializations (1).

In 2003, Romania adhered to the European Higher Education Area, through the reformation of the entire system of graduate and postgraduate studies. On November 5th 2003, the National Rectors Council adopted the Declaration of the National Higher Education Conference, which confirmed the implementation of the Bologna system in the Romanian universities, beginning with the 2005-2006 batch of students promoted. The 288/2004 Law voted by the Romanian Parliament decided the organization of graduate and undergraduate studies in three cycles, namely the bachelor degree programme, the master's degree programme and the doctoral degree programme. The establishment of each study cycle was the responsibility of each of the existing institutions of higher education, if approved by the Ministry of Education and Research (2).

As a result of these major transformations, the reduced frequency study programme shortened its length from 5 to 3 years. The outcomes were significant in what regards the quality of education, since the number of classes remained the same, but they needed to be taken in a much shorter period.

Compared to the full-time study mode, the reduced frequency education programme required the students' attendance to a series of theoretical and practical classes within the faculty, according to a pre-established schedule, only on Saturday and Sunday.

3. Methods

The present study is based upon the results obtained by the students enrolled in the 2006 year at the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University in Iasi. Their grades during the three years of study and at the bachelor degree examination were provided by the secretary of the faculty, together with the info regarding the students' age and the level of their previous studies. As a measure meant to protect their privacy, the names of the students (which are irrelevant to our research) were completely left aside. Using the statistical method, we analyzed all the data gathered, in order to clearly present this type of educational programme, as reflected by the results of those who graduated. We compared the results of the graduates from the reduced frequency programmes with those of the students enrolled to the full-term studies in the same period (2006-2009). The assumption we built our research upon is the following: there are no major differences in the way study in general and the courses are perceived by the two types of students: they all went to the same lectures, given by the same teachers and were examined in the same way.

4. Analysis

Before passing to the proper analysis of the grades of the students under scrutiny here, we believe it is important to briefly introduce the "robot portrait" of the usual graduate of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, attending the reduced frequency programme (Fig. 1). In 2006 there were enrolled 164 students, 92 males and 72 females.

	Reduced frequency students	Full-time students
Age	30.8 years average	22.5 years average
Job situation	Full-time job	Part-time job
Level of study	43% graduates in another field of study	3% graduates in another field of study

Fig. 1 The "robot portrait" of the reduced frequency / full-time student

The first element to be taken into consideration is the students' age. According to the data we were provided with, in 2006 the youngest student enrolled in the first year was only 19, and the eldest was 46. The students' age point average is 30,8 years old. On the other hand, the age point average for the students attending the full-time study programme is only 22,5 years.

Another element to be discussed is the level of studies each of the student had before enrolling. It has been shown that 43% of the students enrolled to the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports have already finalized other graduate or postgraduate study programmes. The main reasons behind their decision to look for other opportunities

are various, mostly related to the demands of the job market. It is highly possible that many of them were unable to find a job according to their current studies, which also compelled them to search for alternatives. Also, a certain number needed the degree in order to advance in their carrier. The only common element is the fact that all of them already have steady jobs, which do not allow them to attend other forms of education – the reduced frequency study programme offers custom-made opportunities to those who can only attend courses and seminars during the weekend. Their fellow colleagues enrolled to the full-time programme can only have part-time jobs, since the daily schedule is very busy and the time is cut short for other activities.

In the summer of 2006 were admitted a number of 164 students, but only 126 actually graduated three years later: some of them gave up their studies, others failed certain exams, and certain number could not pass from one year to the other or were expelled. The biggest admittance score was 9,20 and the lowest 5,36. Between these two limits, the majority of the students (52%) were graded from 7 to 8. The students enrolled to the full-time programme had considerably higher admittance scores – the biggest one was 9,61. Also, the grades below 8 were only a small percentage, if considering the number of those admitted.

The competition to occupy the sponsored university places for full-time studies was tight, compared to the places allocated for reduced frequency studies, where the tuition fees are paid entirely by the student; this is one of the main reasons why the better prepared applicants usually take the full-time sponsored places. Also, during the three years of study, the final scores of the latter were always higher than those of the others, as shown in the next graphic (Fig. 2):

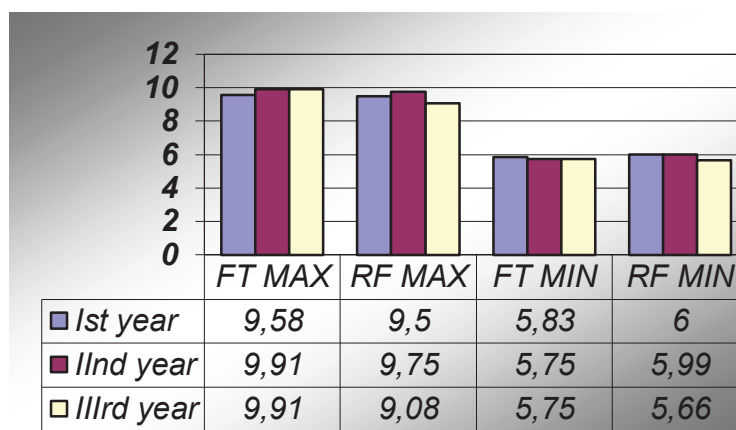


Fig. 2 Highest/lowest score grid per year of study for the full-time students and reduced-frequency students

FT MAX – full-time students' maximum score

RF MAX – reduced-frequency students' maximum score

FT MIN - full-time students' minimum score

RF MIN – reduced-frequency students' minimum score

The students enrolled to the reduced frequency programme failed a higher number of exams, from one session to another. For example, in their first year of study, they did not pass 23% of the total exams from the first try. At the end of the university term there were 37 students who did not pass all the exams, and the following year their number increased to 45. 5 of them were expelled, due to the fact that they were unable to pass their exams as requested by the internal regulations of the University of Iasi. There were a few cases of students who came to exams a year later that they should have, in another term session. This might also partially reflect their interest in classes they were attending.

The general scores are also higher for those attending the full-time programme. Here, the biggest score for the 2009 batch of graduates was 9,69, while for the reduced frequency students it was only 9,41. Still, these numbers are less important for the general picture of the situation; more edificatory is the fact that 53% of the latter had final scores

below 7, and 35% below 8. In what concerns the full-time students, the percentage of the graduates which scored over 8 is much higher – about 46%.

Another essential element for the student's academic record for the completed years of study, besides the graduation average scores, is the grade obtained to the bachelor degree examination. Out of 120 reduced frequency graduates, only 96 of them were examined in the July 2009 term session. They obtained various grades, from the highest result possible – which is 10, to the minimum necessary to pass – i.e. 6. Percentually, only 14% of the students were awarded grades over 8 and only 4% over 9 (with only one student graded with 10). Their fellow full-time students colleagues had more grades over 9 (15%) and 8 (28%). From the students who did not sit for the bachelor degree examination in June 2009, 21 postponed it until the next February or June term sessions, and 2 of them until July 2011.

5. Results and discussion

When comparing the grades obtained by the students enrolled to the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi at the two parallel forms of education, from 2006 to 2009, namely to the reduced frequency programme and the full-time study mode, the differences are impossible to ignore. The reduced frequency students had lower results than the full-time students at all term sessions and also at the bachelor degree examinations, despite the fact that they attended the same classes as their colleagues, taught by the same teachers. The question immediately emerging is the following: what are the causes which led to the present situation?

A first possible answer must be looked for in the profile of the usual reduced frequency student. He is older than the full-time study mode student, has a full-time job which leaves him less hours to study; attending classes does not occupy the highest rank in the hierarchy of his daily activities, as it happens with his younger fellow colleague, and his main interest is only in obtaining the final degree. Thus we could say that the little time dedicated to study and the limited interest shown by the students heavily contributed to the lowest results.

When analyzing students' admittance scores, it is obvious that the youth choosing the full-time study mode have a better general knowledge; their previous school results are higher than those obtained by the reduced frequency applicants (the grades at the baccalaureate examination also have an important weight in the university admittance score).

The number of failed exams from one term session to another by the reduced frequency students can be interpreted in two ways: either as their lack of specific knowledge in their field of study, or as lack of interest in studying for each exam when supposed to. The full time students, who can also access scholarships and occupy places in Faculty dormitories as a result of their high scores, are encouraged to mobilize all their efforts in order to pass their exams each term session at the right time.

Until 2005, in Romania was in place another version of reduced frequency study programme, which lasted for 5 years. After the implementation of the Bologna system, it shortened its lengths to 3 years. Despite the fact that, apparently, the compulsory courses were also reformed and reviewed, it is still a possibility that the volume of information each student has to internalize is too big for the allocated time. The courses and seminars held two times a week cannot possibly cover the entire syllabus, and this leaves the student with one option: individual study, essential for increasing knowledge. Lack or diminishment of individual study could lead to the term results presented above. The over-stuffed syllabus, which remained almost unchanged after the transformation the educational cycles, raises a series of problems hard to ignore, especially in what regards the full-time study mode (where the length of studies also diminished, from 4 years to 3).

The fact that 43% of the students enrolled in 2006 at the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport already graduated another form of higher education is intriguing, too. Obtaining a second specialization does not automatically mark a failure in finding a job after graduating the first cycle. It can be interpreted as a tendency to super-specialization, by those who wish a job promotion or a diversification of their work tasks. Statistics developed in Romania showed that its citizens are not sensitive to short forms of life long learning programmes (such as courses, seminars, workshops etc) and have better faith in university degrees.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the data reflecting the reduced frequency student's academic record for the completed years of study leads to refuting the assumptions upon which we based the present research. Compared to the full-time students, they have obtained, during the three years of study, lower grades, both at the term sessions and at the bachelor degree examination. A possible explanation for these results would be the fact that these students dedicate less time to individual study, since the overwhelming majority have full-time jobs. Many of them need a degree only as a means to benefit at work, and not because they are genuinely interested in the syllabus. The main question, which remains unanswered, is if this form of education – with a reduced frequency – fulfils its purpose. That is, if it offers quality in education and not only a mere university title.

References

1. Education Law No. 84/1995, published in Monitorul Oficial, no. 167, July 31st 1995;
2. Education Law No. 288/2004, art. 1, published in Monitorul Oficial, no. 614, July 7th 2004.